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The Category of the Supernatural: A Valid Anthropological Term?

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Abstract

This paper is a survey of the anthropological literature pertaining to the term 'supernatural'. It considers a number of questions: Is the distinction between natural and supernatural universal? Can the distinction be applied to non-western cultures? What does the term mean as a cultural construction and as a response to reality? Finally, it examines the use of the term supernatural in the contemporary cognitive science of religion. The inspiration for the paper arose from the way that anthropologists often fail to problematise the uses and cross-cultural applicability of the term supernatural.

Introduction

This paper problematises the concept of supernatural as deployed by anthropologists. After presenting a short genealogy of the term, I present arguments against and for the cross-cultural validity of the term supernatural. I then move on to discuss how the term is deployed in the cognitive science of religion. Theorists of this tradition commonly deploy the term supernatural often with reference to belief in spirits (like Tylor) without acknowledging that the term supernatural itself is problematic.

A Short Genealogy of the Term Supernatural

A central concern in cultural anthropology pertains to the cross-cultural validity of anthropological terms. Reminiscent of the debate surrounding the use of the term kinship (Schneider 1980), within the anthropology of religion, there has been debate about the validity of terms such as belief, totemism, religion and ritual (see Kuper 2005). Here I focus on the term supernatural, which is extensively deployed by anthropologists and sociologists of religion. The term itself became common during the enlightenment with scholars emphasising the distinction between the realm of spirits and the natural world and intensified with the growth of natural science with its emphasis on instrumental effectiveness and reproducible results. It is a boundary that has been drawn in the West which, while not arbitrary, is based upon current scientific understandings, and this boundary may shift in relation to future work on traditional and spiritual healing and on the placebo effect (Bosco 2003). As David Hufford has pointed out, Protestant Christianity and Enlightenment scepticism have greatly influenced the way people consider the natural and the supernatural. On the one hand, science rooted in the Enlightenment promotes the scientifically based explanations of natural phenomena and rejects the supernatural since it contradicts the natural laws. On the other hand, the religious organisations following the heritage of Protestant Reformation maintain the split between believing and observing (Hufford 2005, p. 26). Many anthropologists would prefer to deploy the terms 'seen' and 'unseen' rather than supernatural.

Western culture tends to cut reality into two aspects: the natural and the supernatural—the secular and spiritual (see Descola 2013 for a critical discussion). In *Escape from Reason*, Schaeffer argues

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that this division originates from Thomas Aquinas (1215–1274) with its roots in Aristotelian thought. Aquinas differentiated 'nature' and 'grace'. 'Nature', he postulated, was the lower realm of the created, the earthly and the visible. 'Grace' was seen as the higher realm of God, heaven and the unseen. Over a period of time, the realm of nature became separate from the higher realm and began to consume it. Schaeffer writes,

> It is destructive when nature is made autonomous. As soon as one accepts the concept of an autonomous realm, one finds that the lower element begins to eat up the higher (1968, pp. 209–214).

Broadly in western cultures, the term supernatural is used to refer to a belief in the spirit world or to appearing to transcend the laws of nature. Supernatural, defined for example as what is beyond or above nature or natural law, often is proposed as a distinguishing feature of religion (Lohmann 2003). The term natural is deployed here to refer to understandable through normal science. 'Naturalism' is sometimes defined as the thesis that nature is all that exists. The dichotomy supernatural/natural is more common in institutional religion. Whether we oppose it to culture or to the supernatural, then, 'nature' now is somewhat ambiguous, even as a western category, because it lacks any clearly contrasting term. Within anthropology, the term is contested by some who see it as a term of condescension towards those who still maintain superstitious beliefs. Yet the term is championed by others (Lohmann 2003).

Jindra (2003) intriguingly defines 'natural' as referring to absolute, rational and universal facts and 'supernatural' as referring to relative values and beliefs. He shows that behaviours cannot be discretely classified as natural or supernatural. Lohmann (2003) asserts that the defining features of supernaturalism are not ethereality, non-empiricality or transcendence. Significantly, in some cultures, these are derivations of a more central characteristic that *is* ubiquitous in human thought: attributing volition to things that do not, according to current science, have it—a form of animism. If, on the other hand, one defines supernaturalism as seeing volition as an ultimate cause of things that contemporary science demonstrates to have non-volitional causes, then supernaturalism is ubiquitous in various emic permutations.

One of the problems with supernaturalism is that it presupposes a concept of what is real or plausible. Many studies of religion demonstrate that people hold very different and often vague concepts about what range as natural and supernatural (Winzeler 2012; Nemeroff & Rozin 2000; Petrus & Bogopa 2007). Winzeler (2012) points out that the question as to whether all peoples distinguish between natural and supernatural remains controversial. We cannot apply post-enlightenment and scientific notions to all religious systems unproblematically. Following Carol Nemeroff and Paul Rozin (2000), it might be useful to interpret the supernatural as that which does not make sense in terms of contemporary understanding of science.

Against the Cross-cultural Validity of the Term Supernatural

Shorter (2003) rightly notes that even a cursory review of ethnographies of non-western cultures shows a handful of essays devoted to the explication of how certain terms fail to address indigenous realities. Indigenous communities may not categorise their lived worlds in terms of a distinction between the supernatural and natural, but rather, they may view these 'worlds' as inextricably linked. Both Schutz's concept of 'multiple realities' (quoted in Babbie & Mouton 2001, p. 28) and James's concept of 'subuniverses' (quoted in Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p. 28) reinforce the argument that some human societies, such as indigenous communities, do not separate their lived experiences of the natural and supernatural worlds into distinct categories. Some scholars contend that supernatural and natural are etic categories imposed by western scholars trying to understand the beliefs and practices of non-western communities and may

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make little sense to the communities themselves asserts: 'few preindustrial cultures make a neat distinction between natural and supernatural phenomena … [as they] … may simply lack emic categories for "natural" and "supernatural"' (p. 386). This view accords with the view expressed by in his study of the western New Guinean Gururumba: 'our use of the notion "supernatural" does not correspond to any Gururumba concept: they do not divide the world into natural and supernatural parts' (p. 83). Western scholars of indigenous religions who attempt to create categories such as natural and supernatural, are, in fact, efforts at trying to create a western scientifically defined rationalistic framework. Petrus and Bogopa (2007, p. 2) in their study of South African witchcraft and traditional healing suggest that some cultures may view the interaction between the natural and supernatural worlds as a symbiotic relationship, such that, in their reality, there are, in fact, not two separate worlds but rather one world in which the natural and supernatural coexist interdependently. For these communities, the natural and supernatural worlds exist not as bounded entities but rather are conceptualised of as being indeterminate, that is, as not having fixed boundaries.

In some cultures, spirits are part of the natural world rather than separate from it. Waldstein and Adams (2006) note that medical anthropologists studying non-western cultures focus on supernatural forms of healing (spirits, magic and witchcraft) and ignore the purely empirical modalities such as herbalism. As they state, many plants are held to have special powers. Are these powers to be classified as natural or supernatural? Furthermore as Shorter notes, the use of the term 'supernatural' in anthropological literature presents a way of seeing the world that often reflects historically situated, particularly 'modernist', approaches to conceptualising culture, especially for non-western groups. Through the employment of binary models, these ethnographies—focusing upon the supernatural—portrayed cultural dominance. Kenneth Morrison writes that 'western religious concepts lead only to limited, even parochial, insights' (1992, p. 204). He asks whether we should we call for the complete abandonment of such terms?

Others have made similar arguments. In *Ordered universes: Approaches to the anthropology of religion* (1995), Klass rejected the use of the term 'supernatural' for defining religion and for abstracted descriptions of non-western worldviews. That term, he maintained, is loaded with 'judgmental baggage' (p. 6), and 'the dichotomizing of natural as against supernatural … remains invincibly ethnocentric and therefore unsuitable for anthropological analysis' (p. 32). He further asserts that the term 'supernatural' evidences more about the anthropologist than about the culture on which she writes.

> It remorselessly, inescapably categorizes all the information the ethnographer collects in terms of one consideration only -- what the *ethnographer* considers to be part of reality and what the *ethnographer* personally excludes from reality (1995, p. 30, his italics).

Erick White (2003) criticises the imprecision of the term 'supernatural' and the common failure of scholars to define their usage of it or to explain why it is the most appropriate term to describe a given people's spiritual life. Furthermore, it is a rather old word carrying many meanings and much cultural baggage (see Klass 1995, pp. 28–32; Levy *et al.* 1996, p. 13; Saler 1993). Finally, Goody (2004) asserts that the distinction between natural and supernatural arose through the development of literacy and is therefore an historical construct,

Anthropological fieldworkers, immersed in the lifeworlds of different cultures, have regularly underscored the inadequacy of western distinctions between the 'natural' and the 'supernatural' when addressing the beliefs of their informants. In considering Sudanese Azande beliefs in witchcraft, for example, E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1976, p. 30) noted that:

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> To us supernatural means very much the same as abnormal or extraordinary. Azande certainly have no such notions of reality. They have no conception of 'natural' as we understand it, and therefore neither of the 'supernatural' as we understand it. Witchcraft is to Azande an ordinary and not an extraordinary, even though it may in some circumstances be an infrequent, event. It is a normal, and not an abnormal happening.

Phenomena that we would classify as supernatural, or paranormal, are not necessarily conceived of in the same way in other cultural, and sub-cultural, systems. Indeed, the founding sociologist Émile Durkheim pointed out precisely this issue when he noted that the modern notion of the supernatural is a recent one in the history of human cognition, which coincides with the rise of enlightenment science in the 17th and 18th centuries. He writes:

> In order to call certain phenomena supernatural, one must already have the sense that there is a natural order of things, in other words, that the phenomena of the universe are connected to one another according to certain necessary relationships called laws…But this notion of universal determinism is very recent…This idea is a triumph of empirical sciences; it is their basic postulate and has been demonstrated by their progress. Yet as long as this notion was absent or was not firmly established, the most marvellous events never seemed inconceivable (Durkheim 2008, p. 28)

Ethnographers, anthropologists, scholars of religion and literary critics find that modernist ethnographies tend to decontextualise their subjects of study and interpret them in oppositional terms from the perspective of a dominant culture. As Jonathan Z. Smith notes in his book, *Imagining Religion*, the use of taxonomic strategies remained a hallmark of modernist academic practices (1982, p. 1–18).

Furthermore, the imposition of emic concepts upon others results in power inequalities. Lampe (2003) argues that, by imposing etic distinctions like supernatural/natural on the peoples we study, anthropologists exercise an inappropriate power over our subjects and result in cultural dominance.

Even in the West, however, an examination of contemporary movements and practices makes the term problematic, since spirituality—a term which is sometimes deployed synonymously with supernatural in the West—may only be vaguely connected with a higher power, and many non-scientific beliefs and practices attempt to be scientific. The reverse is also often true. A 'reflexive spirituality' (Besecke 2001; Roof 1999) that combines rationality and science with the pursuit of transcendent meaning is increasingly popular and incorporates diverse practices that simply cannot be categorised as natural or supernatural.

Besecke (2001) defines reflexive spirituality as a cultural movement that promotes the use of reason to enhance religious meaning. As a movement, reflexive spirituality represents an effort to bring an enhanced sense of transcendent meaning into the highly rationalised context of the United States. Even influential scientists such as Einstein and Hawking often experience difficulty, explicitly or implicitly, in not reaching beyond science to theology in order to find some meaning and purpose in the universe.

Talmont-Kaminski (2013) deploys the term superempirical to refer to magic and religion. Religions, he asserts, must be protected against potential counterevidence (Talmont-Kaminski 2009). Such superempirical status is partly determined by the content of such beliefs and partly by their social and methodological context. The common treatment of religious topics and items as sacred and, therefore, deserving special respect is an aspect of the social context that serves to protect religion against destabilisation. He opposes the more familiar term 'supernatural' on account of the fact that it tends to imply that which 'cannot be investigated by science' (p. 44), which is problematic in a number of ways. First, since science is a relatively

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recent enterprise in its modern form, implying that no identifiable realm of 'supernatural' would exist prior to the modern scientific era. Second, the boundaries of science are advancing all the time, so that which could not be investigated in the past can be investigated today, reducing the domain of 'supernatural'. Finally, the very idea of 'that which cannot be investigated by science' is arbitrary and meaningless: It is impossible to know what cannot be investigated, and how do we know that any such thing exists at all? (Eller 2013)

Arguments for the Validity of the Supernatural as an Etic Category

In contrast to the above authors, Bosco (2003) in his study of ghosts in Hong Kong argues for the universal applicability of 'supernatural'. He defines 'supernatural' in the etic sense as a realm of spirits beyond the observable world that seems to transcend natural law. Chinese people recognise the spirit world as different from the human world. They view the heavenly, human and underworld (*tian*, *ren*, *di*) domains as linked, but they recognise them as different. He argues that the concept of supernatural is, as Klass notes, a boundary that has been drawn in the West. It is not arbitrary; however, it is based on current scientific understandings. While the boundary between natural and supernatural may shift, it is still an important and useful boundary. The concept is a useful research tool for certain questions, marking a type of phenomenon that involves spirit or magical agency. Without such a concept, we are forced to accept the existence of spirits and phenomena transcending the laws of nature.

Furthermore, he argues that the claim that anthropologists should only use concepts as used by informants is a mistake in epistemology and that it is impossible to write anthropology with only the concepts used by informants. There is a need to translate informants' concepts into other languages such as English and use other concepts within anthropology such as *mana*. He contends that terms such as religion are regularly imposed upon the Chinese:

> Chinese people often claim to have no religion, but anthropologists have not hesitated in defining the complex of activities including ancestor worship, worship of deities in the home, and visits to temples as popular religion.

For him, it is not ethnocentric to use our anthropological concept of religion rather than my informants' concept, since it allows us to compare aspects of Chinese popular religion with other religions.[1] In a similar vein, he argues that the term supernatural can be used to refer to beliefs in spirits.

Bosco points out that we can measure certain claims for spiritual power in terms of their instrumental effective. Supernatural phenomena, he states, should be analysed at a different level from the instrumental level, as socially, symbolically or experientially special, and may or not be instrumentally effective. For example, while a spell may not literally work, it still has social and psychological effects that anthropologists can assess. They do have a real effect at least at the cultural and psychological levels. In his own ethnographic data, ghost stories indeed hold cultural effectiveness; they are true at a cultural level, in that they produce fear and result in moral lessons despite the fact that ghosts do not attack anyone.

Cognitive Science of Religion and its Use of the Supernatural

One area that has been emerging in recent years is the cognitive science of religion. Two of the most active areas within the cognitive approach to religion are explaining why such beliefs are so widespread and studying how they are like or unlike other kinds of thoughts. A central theme is that humans are 'cognitively prepared' for belief, even before they are capable of understanding the complex ideas of any given religious or supernatural belief system. Supernatural concepts are universal because they are supported by shared features of the human mind.

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Religious cognition is based upon psychological modules deployed for other mundane activities and does not require any special psychological systems. Cognitive science of religion (CSR) deploys theories from the cognitive sciences to account for the fact why religious thought and action is so common in humans and why religious phenomena take on the features that they do. The field is characterised by a piecemeal approach, explanatory non-exclusivism and methodological pluralism. Prominent theoreticians in this field include Scott Atran (2002), Justin Barrett (2004), Harvey Whitehouse (2004), Pascal Boyer (2001), Armin Geertz (2014), Robert McCauley and E Thomas Lawson (2002), Ilkka Pyysiäinen (2001), Armin W Geertz and Jeppe Sinding Jensen (2011), Stuart Guthrie(1995) and Dan Sperber (1996).

The foundations of this field focus on inferential systems in individual minds including agent detection, theory of mind and intuitive ontology; supernatural agents are 'attractive' and they are minimally counterintuitive.[2] I present a brief selection of research agenda. Scott Atran (2002) from an evolutionist perspective argues that religion is a by-product of human evolution just as the cognitive intervention, cultural selection and historical survival of religion is an accommodation of certain existential and moral elements that have evolved in the human condition. Pascal Boyer, who adopts a mentalist perspective, notes that religious concepts belong to a class of concepts that Barrett (2000) has called 'minimally counterintuitive'. They fulfil intuitive assumptions about any given class of objects (e.g. persons, plants and tools) but at the same time violate some of those assumptions in small ways that make the resulting concepts particularly attention grabbing and memorable. Barrett (2004) deploys the term HADD (hypersensitive (in some earlier publications hyper*active*) agency detection device):

> When HADD perceives an object violating the intuitive assumptions for the movement of ordinary physical objects (such as moving on non-inertial paths, changing direction inexplicably, or launching itself from a standstill) and the object seems to be moving in a goal-directed manner, HADD detects agency.

McCauley and Lawson (2002) focus upon ritual rather than belief and assert that ritual action *is action*, which is not fundamentally different from any other human social action. Hence, on account of the fact that the 'differences between everyday action and religious ritual action turn out to be fairly minor', then 'the cognitive apparatus for the representation of religious ritual form is the same system deployed for the representation of action in general' (2002, p. 8). That is, humans possess handy, if largely tacit, skills to make sense of action and participate in it.

Geertz and Sinding Jensen (2011) argue that CSR has largely focused upon what the mind brings to the social world. In contrast, these authors examine what the social world brings to the mind, the formative effects of different kinds of cultural knowledge including narratives, classificatory systems, rituals, institutions and everyday practice, and argue for a multidisciplinary approach to understanding religious cognition.

This discipline has attracted much criticism. A pertinent criticism by Jensen (2009) calls the 'standard cognitive science of religion model' revolves around its apparent neglect of culture. He discusses what he terms 'normative cognition', a short-hand generic term introduced to refer to processes of cognition that are bound to, or conditioned by, socio-cultural norms, which scholars of religion typically encounter in cosmologies, classification systems, morality, purity rules, etc. Laidlaw (2007) for instance asserts that cognitive science is not a complete theory of religion. Rather than explaining religion, it accounts for certain forms of cognition. It does not explain what individuals say, think or do nor does it explain the variation in religious ideas/practices in different faith traditions. Religious traditions as historical phenomena are exactly of this kind.[3]

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The anthropologist of religion Pascal Boyer is characteristic of these approaches, and his understanding of religion is quite compatible with that of Scott Atran. Boyer, who purports to 'explain religion' using the lens of cognitive science, argues that all religions contain 'supernatural notions'—including notions of a variety of artefacts, animals, persons and plants. Arguing from observations of indigenous cultures, Boyer extends them to all religions and includes in his purview all Christian beliefs about the nature of God, which he considers to be the supernatural agent par excellence. The entire concept of 'supernatural beings' and 'supernatural agency' is drawn from worldviews that seek causes for natural events in forces or powers that cannot be perceived within the natural world (although those holding these beliefs do claim to perceive them).

Theorists of this tradition commonly deploy the term supernatural without acknowledging that the term itself is problematic. I include here Pascal Boyer, Ilka Pyysiäinen and Justin Barrett. The supernatural is vaguely conceived but focuses on relations with supernatural agencies. Pascal Boyer, a major proponent of this perspective, uses the term supernatural commonly throughout his writings without stopping to consider if it has cross-cultural validity. Ilka Pyysiäinen (2009) titles his book *Supernatural Agents: Why We Believe in Souls, Gods and Buddhas*. There is no consideration given to the use of the term supernatural. Justin Barrett (2004) asserts that the tendency to believe in supernatural agents is innate but does not problematise the use of this term.

Researchers in this field have largely focused on the idea that supernatural agents (beings with minds that can think and plan) are a central feature of religious cognition. Such beliefs take many forms and are found throughout the world—from the God of Christianity to the ancestor spirits of the Fang. However, he appears to be completely unaware that in some of the major contemplative traditions of the non-western world, such as foundational Daoism and Confucianism in China and Theravada Buddhism in South Asia, supernatural powers or forces are either absent or play a relatively insignificant role.

Conclusions

Above I have discussed the uses of the term supernatural by anthropologists who focus on religion. The term only makes sense in relation to the term natural—a division that Bloch calls a 'transcendental social' network based on the human capacity for imagination. The transcendental social consists of essentialised roles and essentialised groups. In reference to Malagasy ancestor worship, he deploys the work of Kopytoff (1971) who asserts that the distinction between material beings and spiritual beings is an ethnocentric representation, which imposes *our* categorical opposition between the natural and the supernatural, or between the 'real' and the 'religious', onto people for whom the contrast does not exist. Bloch also considers the case of Hinduism where he asserts (p. 6) 'The point is that here also the transcendental social husband and wife role is part of one single overarching transcendental hierarchical social system that includes the gods'. For him, the societies he discusses clearly challenge theories advocated by, among others, Boyer, since they explain a phenomenon that can only be distinguished from a greater whole: the transcendental social, by using a contrast between the religious and the secular that is borrowed from a relatively modern system of representations that simply does not apply in their cases. The category supernatural directs the gaze towards one thing at the expense of others.

Overall, my view is that the term is problematic and has little in the way of cross-cultural validity to the extent that (contra Bosco) the distinction between western perceptions (natural versus supernatural) which may not occur in other parts of the world is often deployed as a term of condescension. Furthermore, it often poses an ethnographic judgment concerning what is

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real and unreal. I agree with Klass who asserts 'supernatural' evidences more about the anthropologist than about the culture on which she writes.

> It remorselessly, inescapably categorises all the information the ethnographer collects in terms of one consideration only -- what the *ethnographer* considers to be part of reality and what the *ethnographer* personally excludes from reality (1995, p. 30, his italics).

The term imposes etic views of reality on cultures that may differ in their epistemologies. Indigenous communities may not categorise their lived worlds in terms of a distinction between the supernatural and natural, but rather, they may view these 'worlds' as inextricably linked. Instead, I advocate that anthropologists spell out exactly what they mean by the term to give readers greater insight of how they view reality. The term nature often refers to the physical universe and supernatural to the metaphysical. This leaves a lot of territory unmentioned, e.g. the shared imaginative world of the social and cultural. Scholars often fail to discuss this aspect as part of a shared model of reality.

Short Biography

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Notes

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[1] Roth (2008) argues, however, that Buddhism and the indigenous Chinese religions do not have as their central focus a supernatural agent and second that these religions presuppose that religious assertions can be verified through each individual's subjective experience.

[2] Some cultural anthropologists (e.g. Bloch 2005) who look at the religious beliefs of real world groups contend that counterintuitiveness, and the memorability advantages it confers, cannot fully explain differences in the spread of religious ideas and that other contextual factors are needed to explain the spread of religious beliefs around the world. Bloch (2005, p. 116), however, questions whether supernatural agents in Madagascar, the ancestors, are really counterintuitive. For him, ritual as a mode of communication, involving communication practices which are alternatives to normal understandings and meanings, itself becomes the focus of the awareness of the counterintuitive element while the beings invoked by it almost completely fade from view.

[3] There are many other criticisms of this field. In a critical overview of the work of Boyer and Pyysianen, Jensen (2009) asserts that cognitive science explanations are bottom up—individual minds produce social and cultural matters. Higher levels are not considered relevant, and there is no downward causation. Religious concepts exist because they are easy to acquire and remember. Furthermore, he notes the fact that cognitive approaches fail to address questions of the meaning of religion. This sentiment echoes the views of Laidlaw (2007) who underscores the disregard by cognitive theorists of the importance of self-interpretation in social practices and argues for the role of tradition, intersubjectivity and language in self-interpretations and for the existence of specific emotions. Minds are not just in the brain; they exist in culture, society and in language. Finally, as Jensen correctly notes, cognitive scientists express a distaste for culture and a marked opposition to 'more conventional' anthropology (p. 146).
Amin Geertz (2004, p. 361) accords with some of these views, asserting that Boyer, in his attempt to move beyond variability of the cultural detail, restricts himself to what is occurring in the brain. For him, cognition must be seen as embodied and distributed (Geertz 2010). Bloch (2008) presents another criticism of the cognitive science approach to religion. He proposes that religious-like phenomena in general are an inseparable part of a key adaptation unique to modern humans. This is the capacity to imagine other worlds, an adaptation that is the very foundation of the sociality of modern human society. Arnal and McCutcheon (2013, p. xii) argue that cognitive approaches to religion represent a scholarly endorsement and reinscription of a folk category, i.e. religion, whose primary utilities remain local, contingent and political.

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